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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001710

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKISH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: POLLSTERS SEE HUGE
VICTORY FOR RULING AKP

Classified by Ambassador Eric Edelman. Reason: 1.4 (b,d).

1. (SBU) Summary: A group of pollsters and political scientists predicted to Ambassador March 18 that the ruling AKP will win between 45-55 percent of the vote in March 28 municipal elections. AKP's success will create high public expectations, which the party may have trouble meeting. Meanwhile, AKP's opponents -- including CHP -- are likely to fare poorly. End Summary.

Sweeping AKP Victory...

2. (SBU) On March 18 Ambassador hosted a group of public opinion polling experts and political scientists from Ankara and Istanbul to discuss March 28 municipal elections. The consensus among the experts is that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) will receive between 45-55 percent of the total vote. If it achieves that level of support, AKP will be one of only a handful of sitting government parties in modern Turkish history that have received a higher percentage of votes in municipal elections, according to the pollsters. The polling experts were united in predicting AKP victories in Istanbul and Ankara, among others. Those who discussed Izmir -- traditionally a bastion of the center-left -- think that the race is extremely close. They also noted that an important yardstick for AKP will be how many seats the party wins in municipal assemblies across Turkey but offered no firm prediction as to the party's possible performance.

3. (C) On the evening of the 18th, Tarhan Erdem, prominent columnist for the daily Radikal and owner of the polling firm A&G Research Firm, released the results of his own surveys in Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir on the prominent news channel NTV. His findings largely echo that of the other pollsters: AKP will receive 58 percent in Istanbul and 68 percent in Ankara. Erdem's data, however, show that opposition CHP has a commanding lead in Izmir -- 49 percent to AKP's 33 percent. We have heard from one prominent pollster that the Turkish military commissions Erdem's firm to conduct its polling, a practice our contacts have acknowledged has been going on for years.

...Could Lead to Problems Down the Road

4. (SBU) The pollsters and political scientists agreed that a sweeping victory will present several difficulties for AKP. Chief among them will be increased public expectations and the huge demand for local service the populace will place on newly elected mayors. Professor Ali Carkoglu of Sabanci University pointed out that statistically, it is inevitable that AKP has chosen some less than ideal candidates for Turkey's 3,200 or so mayoralities, where family influence and parochial interests often influence how parties choose candidates. Carkoglu also noted that an overwhelming victory for AKP could spawn splits within the party, citing a government led by former President and P.M. Suleyman Demirel in the early 1970s that fell apart after huge electoral gains.

Opposition Gone Missing

5. (SBU) The group of political observers were united in predicting a poor showing for the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). They said that CHP has been consistently polling between 11-13 percent over the last several months. Carkoglu and Ozer Sencar, director of the public opinion firm Pollmark, separately noted, however, that CHP has received a slight boost in the last two weeks. During that time, party leader Deniz Baykal and P.M. Erdogan

have exchanged public verbal barbs, which has energized some of the otherwise hopeless CHP base. Carkoglu and Sencar asserted that, as a result, CHP may receive 16-18 percent of the overall vote.

16. (SBU) Sencar claimed that CHP's biggest problem is relating to the Turkish public, whose voting behavior is changing in ways CHP cannot or will not take into account. Sencar contended that the Turkish electorate is no longer beholden to the idea of "Father State" (Devlet Baba) as a panacea, nor does it merely support whichever party professes to protect the "Sacred State" (Kutsal Devlet). Voters are more independent-minded, Sencar said, which CHP has not fully digested.

17. (SBU) The experts did not foresee any significant gains by any other opposition party. They predict: 1) the alliance between Kurdish DEHAP and the left-of-center Social-democratic People's party (SHP) will receive 5-9 percent; 2) the True Path Party (DYP) under the stewardship of Mehmet Agar will receive around 9 percent; and 3) xenophobic Genc Party (GP) will win only 2-5 percent.

18. (C) Many of our political contacts -- both inside and outside AKP -- over the last several weeks have told us that AKP could face severe internal strains if it does as well as the polls are predicting. Most recently, in a private March 19 meeting, AKP Ankara provincial chief and member of the party's executive board Nurettin Akman expressed sincere dismay that there is no strong political opposition to his own party. "We need a strong, constructive opposition to keep us on course," he said. He added candidly that many in the party fear that they may make a misstep or "miss something important" after March 28.

Voter Trends

19. (SBU) The lack of a viable political opposition may negatively affect voter turnout on March 28, according to the polling experts. Professor Yilmaz Esmer of Bogazici University asserted that Turks are more likely to stay home from the polls this year than ever. Esmer noted that there may only be a 60-percent turnout. As a result, although AKP may win 50 percent of the vote, this will be a much smaller proportion of the possible vote. The low turnout, therefore, will strengthen the already prevalent view among AKP opponents that there is a democratic deficit in Turkey. Currently, AKP opponents argue that the party has a disproportionate number of seats in Parliament: two-thirds even though it received only 34 percent of the vote in Nov. 2002.

10. (SBU) The pollsters and political scientists also agreed that foreign policy issues are not important in local elections. Cyprus, for example, will not be a factor, they claimed.
EDELMAN